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Ecumenism and the Bishop of Rome

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Ecumenism Today and the Bishop of Rome

One of the most difficult ecumenical questions remaining to be faced is that of the Bishop of Rome. Pope Paul VI himself said that “the Pope... is the great rock in the path of ecumenism.”

Nothing more immediately or clearly symbolizes the unity of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world than this office. The images and symbols connected with the papacy—the tiara and the keys, the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, the figure of Peter himself, even the name Roman Catholic—all these signal a Church united throughout the world under a chief shepherd.

The Roman Catholic Church is visibly united, in fact, for many Christians, too much so. They see not unity but a crushing uniformity. Yet, Roman Catholics consider the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, the successor of the Lord to His Church. Thus, Catholics and other Christians remain divided over the origin and meaning of this office. Its place in tomorrow’s Church must still be considered.

The notion that the bishop of Rome continues the ministry of Peter for the whole Church did not become fully explicit until the fifth century with Pope Leo the Great (400-461). However, Leo’s expression of papal primacy was a development and explicit conceptualization of earlier traditions and practices. Two traditions, originally separate, lie behind the development of what has come to be called the Petrine ministry.

The first was the development or "trajecory" beyond the New Testament of the New Testament images associated with Peter. As first official witness to the resurrection of Jesus and the leading figure among the apostles, Peter was portrayed as a fisher of men, shepherd, a pastor of the sheep, the "universal communion of apostles," and the rock on whom the Church was to be built. A second tradition which became joined to the Petrine tradition was that of the primacy of the Roman Church. From the beginning the Church of Rome played a unique and even preeminent role. Partly this was for traditionalistic reasons; it could claim two apostles, Peter and Paul, both of whom worked and died in Rome. And partly it was for political reasons; Rome was the capital of the empire.

Focus of unity

As early as 1 Peter (c. 85) and I Clement (c. 96) Rome had undertaken the instruction of other churches, in the former case by means of a New Testament letter most probably written from Rome specifically in Peter’s name. In subsequent centuries, according to the Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement Papal Primacy and the Universal Church, Rome “had intervened in the life of distant churches, took sides in distant theological controversies, was consulted by other bishops on a wide variety of doctrinal and moral questions, and sent legates to faraway councils.”

Thus, Rome came to be regarded as the final court of appeal and a focus of unity for the universal Church. Leo’s claim that Peter “is not only the presiding bishop of this see, but also the primate of all the bishops” was from a Roman Catholic point of view only one step in a process of doctrinal development which ended with the definition of papal infallibility not Vatican II’s clarification on the bishop’s share in the Church’s high office and authority.

With its teaching on the collegial nature of the episcopal office, always in union with its head, Vatican II, in a sense, relativized the role of the pope, correcting Vatican I’s one-sided emphasis on papal primacy at the expense of the episcopacy which was the case of the centuries following the Reformation.

Today the importance of the papal primacy or Petrine ministry as a ministry of unity serving the universal Church is increasingly being recognized. The Lutheran participants in the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue have asked the Lutheran churches if they are prepared to join them in affirming “the possibility and desirability of the papal primacy, renewed under the Gospel and committed to Christian freedom, as a larger communion which would include the Lutheran churches.” Similarly, the “Venice Statement” of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARICC), after discussing the variety of perspectives and concerns of oversight (episcopate), states the following: “The only See which makes a valid claim to primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such episcopal functions is the See of Rome, the city where Peter and Paul died. It seems appropriate that in any future union a universal primacy such as has been described should be held by that See.”

As more interest is expressed in the Petrine ministry on the part of Roman Catholic Christians, it becomes increasingly necessary for the Roman Catholic Church to develop a more participatory style of government, involving wider consultation and representation of the laity. Certainly the synodal form of government of the churches of the Anglican Communion presents no obstacle to eventual recognition between that Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

Without diminishing the importance of the episcopal office or papal authority, the Roman Catholic Church could learn much from these churches and synodal structures of government.

1. More Participatory Style of Decision Making.

Roman Catholic teaching assigns to the episcopal office in union with its head, the Bishop of Rome, “supreme and full power over the universal Church.” Each bishop also exercises over his own church power which is “proper, ordinary, and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately regulated by the supreme authority of the Church and can be circumscribed by certain limits, for the advantage of the Church or of the faithful.”

Synodal structures

Without taking anything awaytheologically from the leadership role of the Bishop of Rome or of the episcopal college, it is possible for the Roman Catholic Church to develop a more participatory style of government, involving wider consultation and representation of the laity. Certainly the synodal form of government of the churches of the Anglican Communion presents no obstacle to eventual recognition between that Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

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2. Relations Between Head and Members of the Episcopal College

The relation between the head and members of the episcopal college has seen different historical expressions, reflecting the social and political forms of different historical periods.

After some six centuries in which authority was increasingly centralized in the papacy and understood juridically, the Roman Catholic Church has moved in the direction of a more collegial form of government. Thanks largely to Pope Paul VI’s emphasis on the Synod of Bishops, the structure for a more collegial exercise of the Church’s highest authority is in place, though it is not clear that the synod is presently functioning in a truly collegial manner.

True collegiality will not be realized until the bishops have more say in the determination of the synod’s agenda.
The Broadest Dimensions of Morality

I.

Jesus responds to the question of the meaning of human existence by a moral question and doctrine. The first word, pronounced by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, are the beatitudes. There the meaning of life ("happiness") is presented as tied to a series of ethical demands. Voluntary poverty, goodness, purity of heart, forgiveness, etc.

The second word is presented as a demand for an ethical life: A greater justice than that of the ancient law.

This "new" justice (or new moral life) proposed by Jesus is one of absolute nature which makes absolute demands. It is presented as a demand with no compromise: "You have heard it said... but I say to you..."

Observations

As Rahner has noted, Protestant Christians "would be prepared to recognize a Petrine office do not feel justified in handing over to the pope a blank check for the future, as it were" in matters of infallibility.

In response to this concern Rahner makes several observations:

1. The doctrine of infallibility is one of the most complex issues to resolve, though it is not often properly understood by either Protestant or Roman Catholic Dogmatics.

2. Infallibility is basically a statement about the faith of the whole Church which comes to official expression when a pope or council teaches ex cathedra, "from the chair," that is, explicitly and with full authority.

3. Infallibility is limited, both in its expression and in the definitions themselves which are conditioned by the knowledge, concerns, thought categories, and language of any given historical period.

II.

Theological tradition has always insisted on the fact that Christianity is more than a morality. But, this is to have a very narrow view of morality and to restrain its circumference a priori. One of the merits of Bergson was to have denounced the tendency to reduce morality to a narrow and enclosed moralism and to have emphasized morality's religious and mystical role.

Theology and morality are one in the measure in which it also teaches us the infinite is promised to man. Pragmatic human morality teaches us to love, religious morality teaches us to love. It is presented as a demand with no compromise: "You have heard it said... but I say to you..."

Essential object

What the law of Jesus adds to the ancient law is precisely the character of the Absolute whose universality is demanded. Love your enemies, do not serve two masters, sell all that you have and give to the poor, give one's life for one's love.

This moral law has as its essential object to establish an absolute meaning. It actually integrates that which seems to be an obstacle to this absolute meaning of life, namely, suffering and death. These beatitudes value deprivations and truces love even makes of death its proper sacrament: "Greater love hath no man than that he give his life..."

What is at first blush a negation of love becomes its condition: "He who seeks his life shall lose it; who loses his life, shall find it." It is by this reorientation of the negation that an absolute morality goes beyond a simple mimetic, pragmatic or sociological Notion: If death can become a means, it is because it is not an absolute end; there is a "beyond" which escapes death, but to which only death can introduce us: "Unless a grain of wheat dies..."

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Unique task of morality

The unique task of morality is one which the infinite is promised to man. Pragmatic human morality teaches us to love, religious morality teaches us to love, and in this sense, of being more, where-in is revealed to man his vocation to existence.

When man understands that he has no right to remain enclosed within himself, within the limits imposed on him by his proper limited, when the demand for goodness invites him to go beyond himself and to transcend himself, it is then and only then that man understands the meaning of his life which is transcendent.

Infinite demand

The demand of the Absolute (which is goodness) the limits of man are not definitive and he is not a prisoner to them. He can grow interiorly and become always better than he is, without measure and indefinitely. The desire for good always grows in man only when he responds actively to that desire. Goodness must constantly 여의 own transcendence.

In its practice, it is revealed as more and more demanding, more and more transfiguring. And, it is by this infinite demand that goodness is revealed to man as meaning to and in his life. It is this demanding and infinite character of morality which belongs to the religious and not vice-versa. To make of religion the foundation of morality is to have a religion which is not rooted in life and, therefore, based on false transcendence; it also means that what we have is a fragile morality because it is incapable of finding in itself its own justification since the goodness which it proposes is not absolute.

Only morality establishes a valid transcendence because true transcendence is not objective but interior to us; this morality does not reveal a God exterior to me as someone who is "totally other," but as interior God who, in me, desires to grow with me. It is a God to whom I am related and bound (religion) and His infinity is now tied to mine.